

Governor ends brief, busy term

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BOISE – Gov. Jim Risch says it's easy to pinpoint the best decision he made in his seven months as governor: not running for governor.

"I would've been a candidate, always viewed as a candidate – everything I did would've been weighed from a political standpoint," Risch told The Spokesman-Review. "Instead I chose to be governor for the period of time that was allotted to me."

Risch's term as Idaho's 31st governor ends Sunday. It was marked by a historic special legislative session in which he pushed through major tax reform legislation; the submission to the federal government of a far-reaching new plan for managing roadless public lands across the state; and initiatives targeting scattered state efforts to fight substance abuse, improve nursing education, speed road improvements and more.

"Both Vicki and I are honored to have had this opportunity – I wouldn't trade it for much," Risch said. "It was just something I've wanted to do for a long time, and now I've done it, enjoyed it, and hopefully people will view it as modestly successful at least."

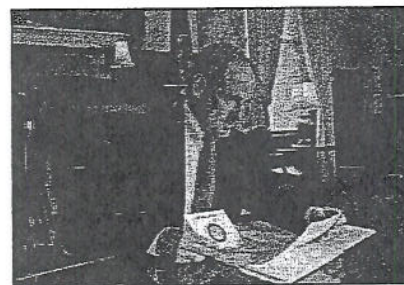
Jim Weatherby, political scientist emeritus at Boise State University, said, "He accomplished as much as you could have expected of anyone. ... I just think it's a case study of what an assertive governor can do and can accomplish."

Northwest Nazarene University political scientist Steve Shaw said, "The easy thing would've been to say, 'I'm going to be a caretaker and keep the seat warm,' but I don't think that's Jim Risch's nature, and I don't think it's what the state needed either. ... I think people want governors who will stand for something and do something."

There's no dispute that Risch did a lot in his short term. Asked which of his changes will have long-term impact, Risch pointed to his property tax legislation, his decision to opt out of a federal program that would have allowed increased mercury emissions in the state, his reorganization of the Department of Health and Welfare, his nursing initiative, and his roadless plan.

"Congress should have done this 40 years ago," Risch said of the roadless plan. "Nothing's happened."

The plan, which establishes through federal rule-making how various categories of roadless wildlands should be managed, is a step short of congressional legislation establishing new wilderness areas, but Risch said it includes both important protections for areas that clearly will become wilderness one day, and increased flexibility to actively manage other lands that clearly won't.



Idaho Governor Jim Risch works at his desk Friday afternoon. Risch will be turning over the governorship to C. L. "Butch" Otter on Monday. (TROY MABEN Special to The Spokesman-Review)

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Risch also noted that he quietly signed the "2525 Agreement," a commitment that's been signed by many of the nation's governors to move their states toward getting 25 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2525. "I was one of the first (governors to sign)," he said, while California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was the 18th. The California governor's signing of the agreement drew international publicity.

Risch also said his establishment of offices in North Idaho and eastern Idaho will make the governor's office more responsive to those regions. "I would be very surprised if anybody shut down these offices," he said.

The property tax legislation, which lowered property taxes by \$260 million while raising the sales tax, has gained Risch the most accolades in North Idaho, where lawmakers long have pushed for property tax relief but have been stymied by resistance from other regions. That changed this year when the Legislature enacted a historic increase in the homeowner's exemption and other changes, but many wanted more.

Risch wrote his own bill, called a special session of the Legislature to consider only that bill and pushed it through. Then voters endorsed it in a statewide advisory vote by 72 percent.

"His detractors said that was arrogant and dictatorial, but sympathizers would see it as being aggressive and an excellent form of leadership to address what was one of the most pressing issues in the regular legislative session," Weatherby said.

Shaw added, "Whether or not you like the result or how it was done, that was leadership." Risch's aggressive approach mirrored his approach to other issues, Shaw said, whether they involved escaped domestic elk that posed a potential threat to state game herds (Risch ordered them shot), flooding along the Boise River in Eagle (he called out heavy equipment to fix it), or complex issues like tax reform.

"He said, 'OK, here's a problem, let's don't let it linger,' " Shaw said.

Risch, an attorney and former prosecutor, was Idaho's lieutenant governor after he was the longest-serving state senator in state history. He was widely expected to run for governor this year but opted not to after fellow Republican Butch Otter, a three-term congressman, jumped into the race early and piled up copious campaign funds and endorsements.

When then-Gov. Dirk Kempthorne was appointed U.S. secretary of the interior in May, Risch stepped up and became governor – and had one last chance to take on Otter in the GOP primary for governor, this time as an incumbent. But he passed.

"When I made the decision to not run for governor, one of the factors that played into that – and it factored in relatively heavily – was that had I chosen to run for governor as opposed to be governor, I don't think I ever would've been governor," Risch said, at least not during that interim period.

Instead, he said, he chose to run for re-election as lieutenant governor "knowing that a race for lieutenant governor won't be much of anything."

His unsuccessful opponent for lieutenant governor, former Democratic Congressman Larry LaRocco, tried hard to draw Risch into the campaign, but Risch essentially ignored him and coasted into re-election on the strength of his record as governor. That prompted charges from LaRocco that Risch was using the governor's office to campaign for lieutenant governor and that the state plane had become

Risch's "campaign vehicle."

"If you were on the other side, why wouldn't you complain about that?" Risch said. "There's not much else to complain about. When you really boil it down, what his complaint was, was that my governorship had been relatively successful, and when it's successful, it gets good ink."

Risch said it worked out just as he hoped: "I was doing my job, and I was able to do the job the way I wanted to do it, and that was without being bitten from behind on the political stuff."

Now he heads back across the marble hall on the second floor of the state Capitol to the much-smaller lieutenant governor's office, where he'll serve in the Otter administration. Comparing the lieutenant governor to the governor, Risch said, is "like comparing an ant and an elephant."

The governor makes significant executive decisions every day, and sometimes hourly, Risch said, while such decisions just aren't part of the lieutenant governor's job.

The official duties of the lieutenant governor are to preside over the state Senate when it's in session, fill in for the governor when he is out of state and "perform such duties as the governor may deem necessary for the good of the state." His unofficial duty is to respond to constituents.

Risch said he'll devote himself to economic development and approach the No. 2 job for the next four years like he did under Kempthorne, though "if called upon for advice, I will gladly give it."

"I've said over and over again, the state needs one chief executive," Risch said. "Anybody who thinks I'm going to try to inject myself into the job that the chief executive has to do is badly misinformed."